

# How I write short fiction

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March 2020

*This is an edited version of the notes I used for a presentation for grade 8 students on writing short stories in December 2019. They had read "The Sound of Home" ahead of my presentation.*

While I have been writing stories for as long as I can remember, I started taking my writing more seriously in my mid-thirties. My kids were in school and I had regained a certain degree of mental space.

At that time, I was writing literary fiction, short stories and at least a handful of unfinished novels (that range from potentially salvageable to not). I had some short fiction published.

I also tried my hand at mysteries, because I have a deep and profound love for mysteries (particularly Sayers, Christie, and Marsh, but I like contemporary writers, too). I wrote one novel (unfinished, but I did go through at least a couple of drafts) and some short stories, but I was unsatisfied with how they were working out. Mysteries take a level of detail and planning that I am not sure I possess.

I have been reading science fiction for a very long time and, in Ottawa, where I live, there is an excellent annual speculative fiction convention (Can-Con) that I began attending in 2015. And really spurred me on to start to write science fiction, which I took to far more easily than mysteries.

These days I write SF almost exclusively. I write flash fiction, short stories, and have one completed novel that is currently looking for a home.

What follows will be a discussion of how I write short stories, using my story "The Sound of Home" as an example (published in *Dragon Bike: Fantastical Stories of Bicycling, Feminism, and Dragons*). The call for submissions for this anthology particularly asked for intersectional feminist stories that contain both bikes and dragons. (The anthology series goes by the name *Bikes in Space* and I also have a story in *Bikes Not Rockets* and another in an upcoming currently untitled volume.)

Before I begin, I want to stress that this is my process and other people have different processes. There is no one, single, perfect way to write a story. In fact, the way I wrote "The Sound of Home" (in 2018) is not how I work now (in 2020).

If you are interested in writing, feel compelled to write, and if anything I say here conflicts with your own feelings or experiences -- that's totally fine. Ignore me.

## **What inspires me**

The reason I write science fiction, the reason I enjoy it so much, is because I like to think about what kind of world we want to live in. My day job is doing communications in the global governance field.

I strongly believe that we shouldn't just be leaving things to change, but should very intentional. What could be the good future outcomes of our current situation? Or the bad outcomes? Outcomes isn't the best word for this, as it is never finished, but we need to be thinking, how do we get there? What do we do?

And then, the next step from there is, what will it be like when we do get there? Humans (in a broad way, in the incredible breadth of human behaviour and personalities and difference) are the same regardless of their situation or location.

(Note! I'm not saying all humans are the same. I'm saying individual humans react in predictable ways.)

And then the other part of this is that SF is allegorical, so it has political or moral or social meaning. Within that, it can be proscriptive (saying what should be done), it can act as a warning (what shouldn't be done), or it can just be exploring a range of possibilities or what might be the implications of this or that choice or policy without a definite position one way or the other.

So, I am writing from a place where I want to see:

- the exploration of new worlds without "conquering" them, where people can be curious and explore without colonizing
- where there is equality and equity, regardless of sex or gender
- what i guess we'll call a socially progressive society
  - but at the same time, I have few illusions about how people behave
  - so i don't expect perfection (or complete evil)

## **EXAMPLE**

In 'The Sound of Home' there are certain ideas that I see as rather universal: a parent and child in an isolated, fraught situation, isolated; there is misunderstanding and regret (which fuels conflict, in this case very small case internal conflict) -- but these take place in a novel situation, on a faraway moon.

## **Where I get my ideas**

Because I write science fiction, I read a lot of current research -- books, journal articles, magazines, websites -- from NASA and other space agencies, academics, popular science organizations, etc. Relatedly, on social media (Twitter), I follow a lot of planetary scientists, astronauts, astrophysicists, etc and I get a lot of ideas from them.

Most of my story ideas come from a location, a setting, or situation and thinking about how a specific person would react to it. I have a lot of story fragments floating around in my mind (and I do write them down so I won't forget any).

I often reuse ideas, trying to approach from different angles. It's usually because I haven't quite hit exactly what I was trying to say. Although sometimes I use an idea once and get to a different place than where I was expecting. Using the same general idea again can also be another attempt at getting to where I wanted to be in the first place.

## EXAMPLE

I have a novel (that is currently looking for a home) that involves an expedition to Saturn's moon Enceladus. And in that novel there is an encounter with a very different/strange form of alien life. 'The Sound of Home' is, in some respects, a simplified version of that aspect of the novel, but with a very different plot.

Another aspect of 'The Sound of Home' is the idea of having a parent and child as the main characters. This came out of me thinking about how too many of the stories I was writing either had really isolated main characters or they were in a romantic relationship, so I was thinking that I wanted to do something else.

And then, in this case, there was this particular call for submissions - asking for stories with dragons and bikes. It was thinking about the dragon aspect that made me decide that this should be on Enceladus.

As an aside, calls for submission, whether themed anthologies as in this case, or magazines with themed issues, can be really useful for generating ideas, even if you don't end up submitting to that specific call.

## How I write

When we talk about the 'how' of writing a story, of whatever length, the first question is whether to outline or not.

I used to only outline novels or otherwise more involved pieces and let shorter ones (say, under 7500 words) come as they may. And, to some degree, that worked.

However, over time, I found that my editing process for shorter pieces was, as a result, often quite onerous, as my stories frequently lacked details like a proper ending. (Which I 'got away with' in some of my literary fiction, see the story "Swimming Lessons" published in *(parenthetical)*.)

I think some writers fear that if they outline or think too much about a story or idea that they will lose the essence of it, that the creative spark will be dimmed by overwork. And I think that because I had that sort of unexamined feeling in my own mind at one point. But I have come to see the benefits of examining and deconstructing and reconstructing my ideas.

All that to say, outlining doesn't have to be complicated. It can be as simple as a brief sketch of what will happen in the beginning, middle, and end. Or it can be a list of possible scenes. Or it can be far more complicated, if that is what you prefer.

Personally, I find now that having at least a basic outline of scenes keeps me on track and, as a result, I avoid getting stuck. The outline typically changes as I go, especially if it's a longer story, but I have always have some next step on the list.

And as long as those scenes are connected, the story will have at least a rudimentary flow to it. Matt Stone and Trey Parker (of *South Park*, etc) talk about how scenes should connect with "but" (unexpected consequence or event) or "therefore" (logical consequence) to ensure everything fits together.

## EXAMPLE

Despite having said all of that, when I wrote "The Sound of Home" in 2018, I did so with little in the way of an outline, which was reflected in the lengthy editing process.

Regardless of whether I have created an outline or not, I write my first draft completely before I begin to edit. I don't go back and re-write a sentence or paragraph or scene.

As I write, if I change something -- like the tone or specific details about the characters or setting, or anything else that will require changes to previous scenes -- I make a note and continue.

After writing the first draft, I usually give a story a bit of time before I begin the editing process, so I can look at it with fresh eyes. How long of a time I wait depends on what else I'm working on and how long the story is. With flash fiction, it may be that I go back to it the next day.

The next draft, the first round of editing, I read the story while making small changes to word choice and sentence structure, making it pretty and adding descriptive elements that might not be there yet. My first draft is generally focused on the main plot.

At this point, I also incorporate any notes that I made during the first draft and think about whether it needs to be longer or shorter and whether it needs additional scenes.

I don't necessarily do all of those things at once. This 'next draft' can end up being two or three or more times through the story. Maybe some parts of it just aren't working, which is a very subjective assessment. Maybe they are in the wrong order.

## EXAMPLE

In the case of "The Sound of Home," it started out as a much darker story and the mood lightened as I worked on it. And this was because the dark tone in the first scene did not end up matching where the story went as I wrote it.

I liked the flashback elements of the story, but I struggled to make them clear and distinct from the current time of the story.

Which leads to the importance of which techniques are chosen to convey different elements of the story. If I want to use flashbacks or multiple points of view or some other technique, I need to make sure that they make sense to the reader.

And the more I look at and re-read what I have written, the harder it can be for me to judge how much sense it makes anymore.

That's where having a writing circle or critique group or writing partner can be helpful. Having someone I trust read my work and give feedback can validate my choices or alert me to aspects that miss their intended mark.

In the case of "The Sound of Home," I worked with the anthology editor and her assistant to make some changes (particularly around the beginning and the flashbacks and clarifying the ending). Some publications (or anthology editors) want to be part of that editorial process, but others simply don't have the capacity (in which case, I want to go through that to some extent on my own, ahead of submitting).

Regardless, a willingness to take criticism and consider it fairly is absolutely necessary. I have learned not to be too attached to the specifics of any story. The editor (or critique partner or whoever) has the best interests of my story at heart (and if I don't feel that way, maybe they aren't the best person to work with).

## **Writer's block**

The issue of writer's block often comes up. The following is my own take on this and how I (personally) deal with it.

As far as I am concerned, there are two distinct types of writer's block:

- when I can't write at all and

- when I can't work on this specific thing.

In the first case, when I find that I cannot write at all, I have a few strategies.

The first ideas revolve around the basic premise of "do something else." Sometimes that something else is writing adjacent, like doing research (reading, watching, listening) or writing non-fiction or blog posts. Other times, the something else is cleaning or going for a run. I find that physical activity is usually helpful.

Otherwise, planning ahead, I find it useful to have a schedule or overall idea of the writing and writing-related items I want to complete in the current week and month. Looking at the plan, I can pick out something that suits my current state of mind.

The one thing I try to avoid is dwelling on the idea that I can't write or I'm stuck or I have 'writer's block,' as nothing good comes from it.

When I can't work on a specific story or other item, I begin by asking myself why. What, exactly is the problem? Is it that I don't know what the next scene should be? Is it some larger issue about the story itself that isn't working?

I find that investing some time in identifying the specific problem is worthwhile, because the antidote is dependent on the problem.

If I don't know what the next scene should be, I can ask myself the standard question: what's the worst thing that can happen to the character at this point? Or I can choose a random object or event to include, to see how that changes the story and how the characters react.

I attempt to preempt such problems by having at least a rudimentary outline or scene list.

If the problem is the story itself, that's when I begin to consider whether it is salvageable or not. Maybe it isn't salvageable in the moment and the story needs to be put aside to let my subconscious work on it. Maybe there is some aspect of it that is worth using as the basis for another story.

And sometimes I just file it away and go on to work on something else.

*Also available at <https://nowhereilive.ca/how-i-write-short-fiction/>*